
BUILDING A HEALTHIER TOMORROW

Health Equity and Access in Auburn

February 2014



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INTRODUCTION

Healthy communities are critical to our state's well-being and economic growth. Yet, too often, communities do not have access to the resources they need to thrive.

When it comes to staying healthy, what barriers are faced by Auburn community members? How are those barriers felt across class and race? And what can we do, both individually and collectively, to create healthier communities?

In order to answer these questions, Washington Community Action Network (Washington CAN!) began working with Auburn residents in September of 2013. With a focus on preventive health measures, we gathered community input through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. Through this work, we had conversations with hundreds of Auburn residents about healthy food and physical activity.

In partnership with community members, local agencies and service providers, we have identified common themes and struggles facing Auburn residents. We have worked together to develop community-driven solutions that will address specific barriers, and improve the health of the Auburn community.

Included in this report are the findings from our work and recommendations for how to improve access to healthy food and physical activity. Through creating model programs to address critical health needs in Auburn, we can also stimulate innovation throughout South King County – leading to healthier communities, and a healthier state.

AUBURN: A CITY HEALTH PROFILE

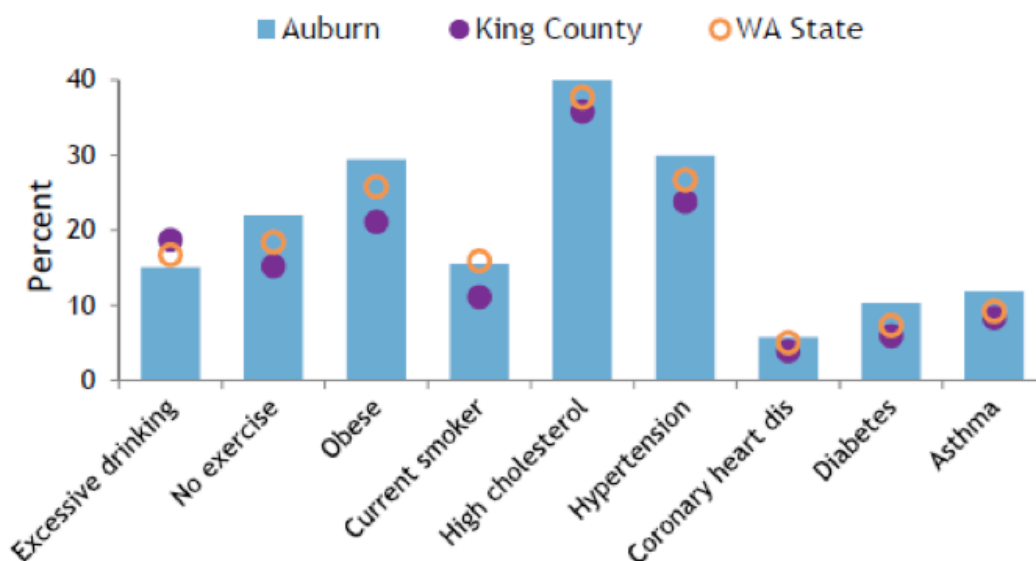
The City of Auburn, located in South King County in Washington State, is home to a diverse community of 74,000 residents. Auburn also has some of the worst health outcomes compared to King County and the rest of the state. Of the 25 areas assessed in King County's Auburn city health profile from 2012, Auburn ranks worst in terms of mortality and cancer, and second worst in incidence of heart disease. Auburn residents also have the lowest life expectancy at birth (77.8 years) in King County, 29 percent of Auburn residents are obese and 22 percent report having no physical activity in the past 30 days.

The City of Auburn also contains a significantly higher proportion of families and individuals facing financial hardship compared to the rest of King County. A

census tract conducted from 2007 to 2011 reveals that the median household income in Auburn ranges, on average, from \$6,000 to \$50,833, with 11.4 percent to 19.7 percent of its residents living below the federal poverty level.² Meanwhile, the median household income in all of King County is \$71,175 with 10.2 percent of its population living below the federal poverty level.³

Given the disproportionately high rates of poverty, illness, and health risk factors, Auburn is the ideal community for a project focused on improving health equity. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the unique barriers faced by Auburn residents, and develop community-driven solutions that will have a sustainable impact.

HEALTH RISK FACTORS AND CHRONIC DISEASES



King County City Health Profile: Auburn 2012, Public Health of Seattle & King County

METHODOLOGY

Community Surveys

Over the course of six weeks, Washington CAN! conducted a door-to-door household survey of more than 1,500 households. The goal of the survey was to determine the accessibility of healthy food and physical activities for Auburn residents. In addition, we wanted to identify the various barriers to healthy food and physical activities that residents face.

547 surveys were collected, and the findings are detailed in this report. Survey respondents were identified through a targeted, but random sampling of low- to moderate-income households within the Auburn city limits. Outreach was conducted in both English and Spanish, the two most common languages spoken in the city of Auburn.

The surveys included a series of questions concerning:

- **Access to affordable fruits and vegetables**
- **Access to affordable opportunities for physical activity**
- **The overall health of the respondent's neighborhood**

37 percent of survey respondents were people of color and included those who identified as: American Indian/ Native Pacific Islander, Asian, African American, Hispanic/Latino, and those who selected Multiracial. Within this group, the two largest self-identified groups were Hispanic/Latino and Multiracial. Some of the data included in this report has been disaggregated to paint a more accurate picture of the lived experiences of Auburn residents of color.

Respondent and Key Actor Interviews

In addition to the data collected through the surveys, 47 in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by Auburn residents. Interviewees were identified by a random sampling technique from the pool of individuals that completed the surveys.

Interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted over the phone and in person. These interviews were intended to delve deeper into the topic of access to healthy food and physical activity. Individuals who expressed interest were invited to participate further in focus groups with other Auburn residents.

To provide additional context and perspective we also conducted interviews with 12 key actors working on issues of health in Auburn and South King County. Organizations included the Auburn Food Bank, South King Council of Human Services, the King County Public Health Clinic in Auburn, and the King County Public Library in Auburn.

Focus Groups

In addition to collecting individual feedback, focus groups were held to bring community members together to share thoughts and brainstorm solutions. Two focus groups were held in English and one in Spanish, with approximately 5-10 participants attending each.

Excerpts of the interviews, as well as from the focus groups are included in this report and inform the recommendations.

547 surveys collected

47 individual interviews

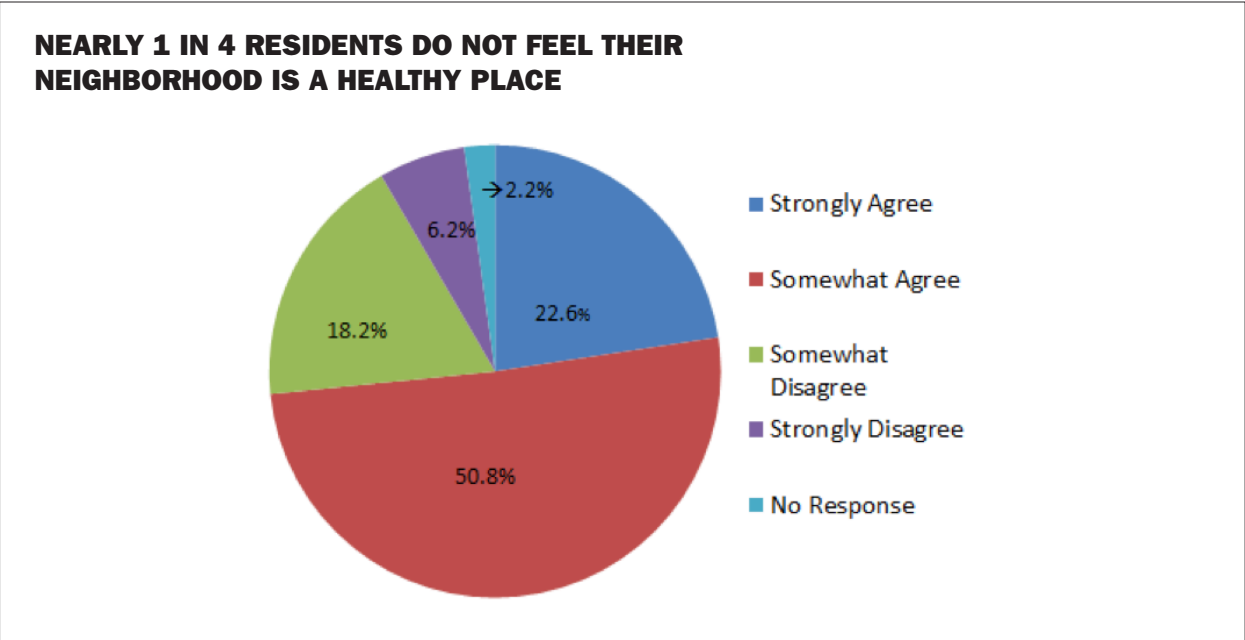
12 key actor interviews

3 focus groups (1 in Spanish, 2 in English)

FINDINGS

According to our survey nearly 1 in 4 Auburn residents disagreed (24.4 percent of respondents; 6.2 percent strongly, 18.2 percent somewhat) with the statement, “My neighborhood is a healthy place with good access to affordable, nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity and exercise.”

In an attempt to understand why this is, we sought to identify the major barriers to raising healthy families in Auburn, and worked with community members to identify solutions to alleviate those barriers.



Access to Healthy Food

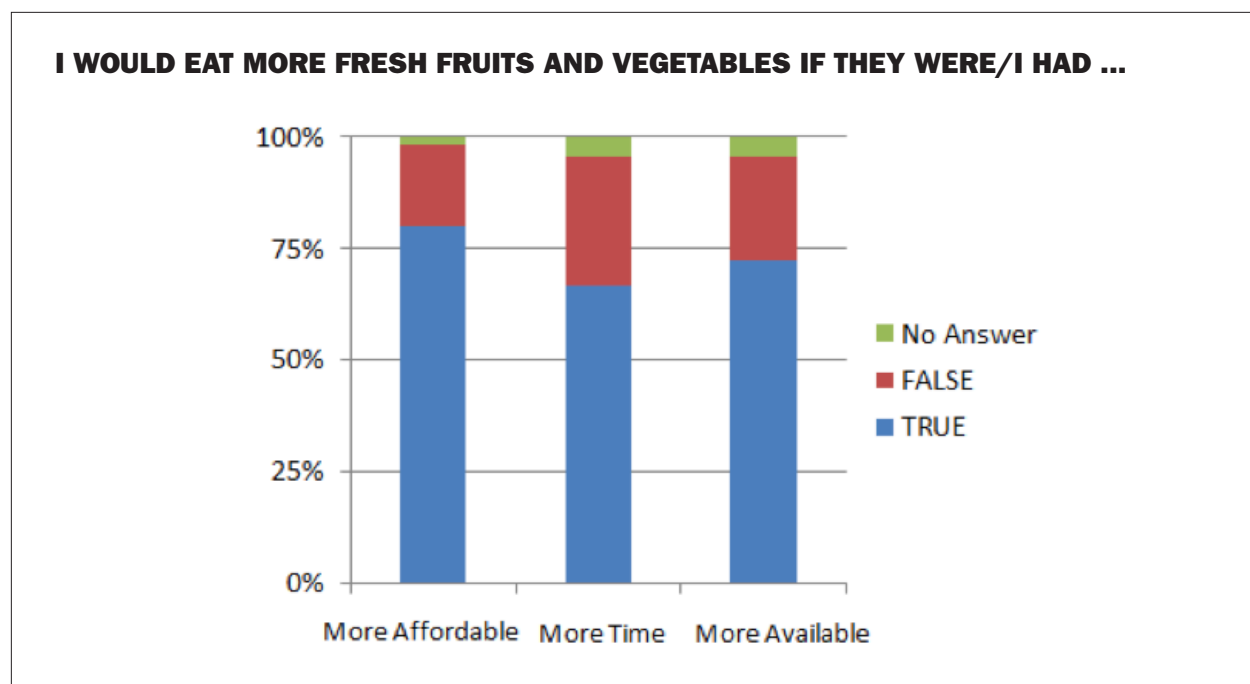
A healthy diet with a balance of fresh fruits and vegetables is critical to achieving longevity and quality of life, as well as preventing illness. However, as survey responses and testimonials from in-depth interviews attest, a large majority of Auburn residents face significant barriers that make access to healthy food challenging.

With the abundance of cheap, unhealthy, and fast food alternatives available in Auburn, selecting the healthy option often comes down to a question of cost. When asked what would make it easier to eat more fruits and vegetables, most respondents answered the affordability of healthy food, followed by availability and time respectively.

With the abundance of cheap, unhealthy and fast food alternatives available in Auburn, selecting the healthy option is hardly a choice.

Affordability is the Biggest Barrier to Getting Healthy Food in Auburn

80.2 percent of respondents answered 'True' to the statement, "I would eat more fresh fruits and vegetables if they were more affordable." The data clearly shows that Auburn residents also see lack of time (67 percent) and lack of availability (72 percent) of healthy options as significant barriers to eating healthy food.



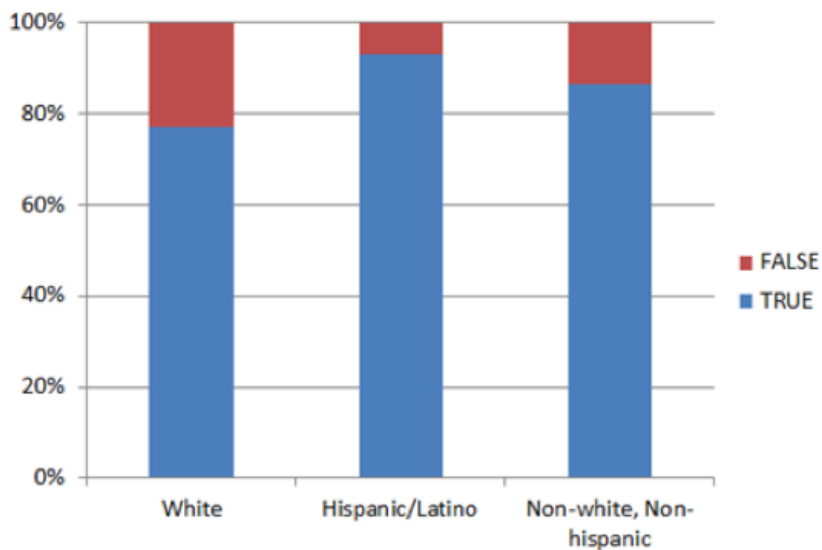
“My daughter and I receive \$150 a month in SNAP (food stamps) benefits to use for food each month. It’s hard enough to make that last longer than two weeks, but given how expensive healthy food is, it’s nearly impossible. In addition, I suffer from nerve damage and back problems that prevent me from working and for that I receive social security benefits. Last year when I received my cost of living increase from social security, they took that exact amount out of my food stamps. That defeats the whole purpose of a cost of living increase! Due to my extreme allergies, I’m limited to the rarer and more expensive items in the grocery store. Often times I have to go to special grocery stores outside of Auburn to get the items that I can eat because I can’t find them at the stores here. I want to make healthy choices for myself and my daughter, but it’s extremely challenging when you’re relying on a fixed budget.”

—Anonymous Auburn resident

More People of Color See Affordability as a Barrier Compared to Whites

Our data also revealed that a greater percentage of people of color see affordability as a barrier to eating healthy food, compared to those who identify as white. While 77 percent who identify as white marked that the statement “I would eat more fresh fruits and vegetables if they were affordable” was “true,” 93 percent of those who identified as Hispanic/Latino and 86 percent who identify as people of color marked “true.” These results suggest that the economic barriers are felt more broadly for people of color in Auburn than for their white counterparts. Meanwhile, the responses for time and accessibility did not vary significantly.

PERCENT WHO FEEL AFFORDABILITY IS A BARRIER TO HEALTHY EATING



93% of Hispanic/Latinos

86% of Non-Hispanic People of Color

77% White people

Reported TRUE: “I would eat more fresh fruits and vegetables if they were affordable.”

Affordability and Time: Symptoms of the Same Disease

While they may appear to be two separate issues, unaffordability and lack of time are usually linked by a common cause: underemployment and low-wage jobs with few benefits. Participants in all three focus groups brought up the fact that they are exhausted from working long hours, sometimes at multiple jobs, to make ends meet and provide for their families. As a result, quick and simple meals that leave children full are often the go-to. As most respondents admitted, these meals are not normally the healthiest options.

Respondents also mentioned that healthy alternatives are often too expensive and/or perishable and do not last as long. Many respondents explained that they go grocery shopping once or twice a month and look to purchase whatever will stretch their dollars the farthest.

What their answers illustrate is that the barriers of time and affordability stem from the same root cause: economic insecurity.

“I can buy a 24-pack of top ramen for a couple of bucks and to me, I’m thinking—that’s 24 meals for my kids. Meanwhile, a pound of fresh fruits or vegetables is probably twice the price and only lasts a couple of days.”

—Anonymous Auburn resident

“Last year my husband was doing his apprenticeship in construction and I was commuting to north Seattle every day to work as a caretaker for two elderly women. Most days when we got home we were both too exhausted to cook dinner, so we often picked up fast food or went out to eat. We know that making food at home would have helped us eat healthier, but we also needed to work as much as we could to provide for our five-year-old son. A couple of months ago my husband was promoted, which meant that he got a raise, benefits and a steady 40 hours of work each week. This change in our income has allowed me to go back to school and spend more time at home with my family. Now I have the time and energy to cook healthy meals at home and I pack a healthy lunch for my family every day.”

—Mayra, Edgar, and Randy Perez, downtown Auburn

As Mayra’s story demonstrates, a raise in income can have a ripple effect on the health and well-being of a family. Not only does it reduce the stress of parents working to get by, it also means that families can afford to buy healthy food and have the time to plan out healthy meals in advance.

Availability: One Piece of the Puzzle

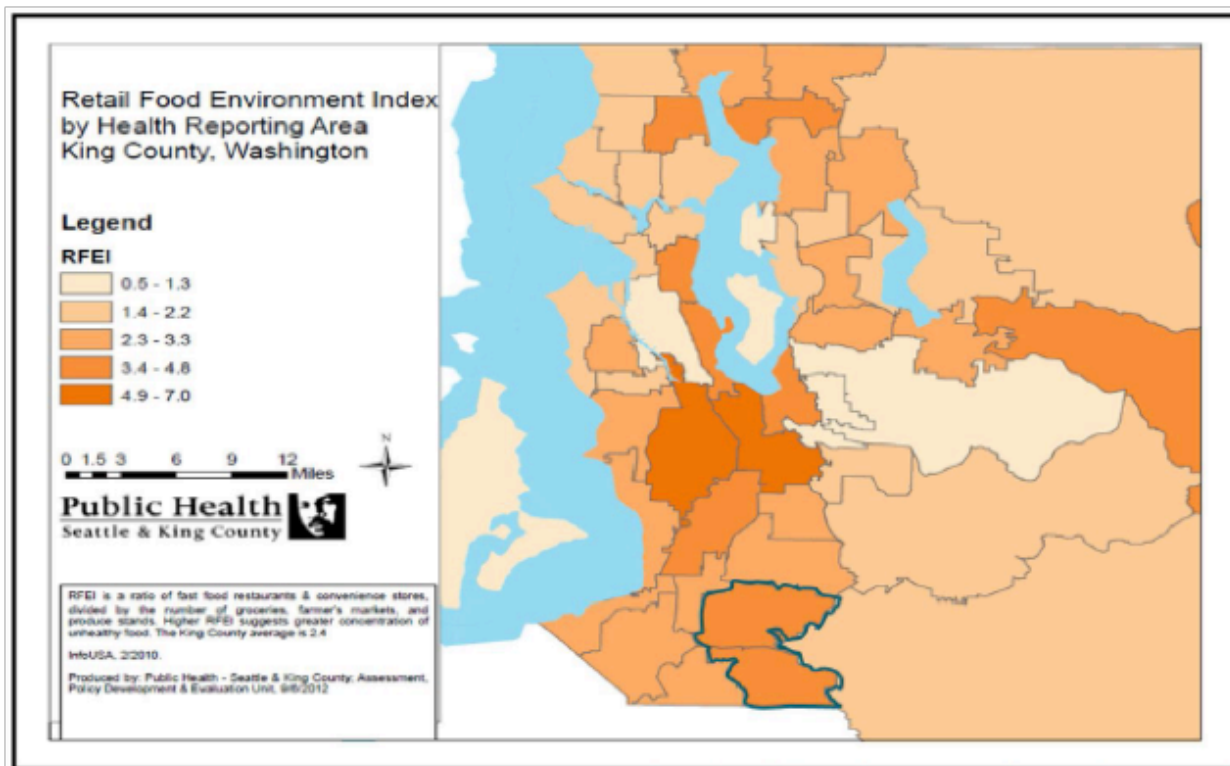
In addition to affordability, respondents spoke about the lack of grocery stores in Auburn. According to King County Public Health data, the area of South King County that includes Auburn has 3-5 times as many fast food restaurants as healthy food options. This means that the odds are heavily stacked against choosing the healthier, more expensive options.

In the last year two major grocery stores in north Auburn have closed, leaving some residents with few affordable options in their neighborhood. For those

who are disabled or dependent on public transportation, having options for grocery shopping nearby is essential.

However, evidence suggests that adequate access to grocery stores is not, in and of itself, enough to improve the health outcomes of the low-income residents in these so-called “food deserts.” People are still struggling to afford the healthy options that are available. While limiting access to unhealthy options is an important part of improving health outcomes, introducing more grocery stores has not generally been shown to have a change in diet quality and fruit and vegetable intake.⁴

RATIO OF FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS TO GROCERY AND FARMERS MARKETS IN KING COUNTY



This chart demonstrates that the part of King County including Auburn has approximately 3-5 times as many fast food restaurants as grocery stores, farmers markets and produce stands.

“I am disabled and rely on the Access bus to get around. The biggest issue I see is that your nutrition is dependent on what is available. I have found I would have to go to multiple stores to get all the fruits and vegetables at the best price possible. Now that two grocery stores closed, the options have narrowed, but there are less affordable options to choose from.”

—Julie Bosarge, Lea Hill resident

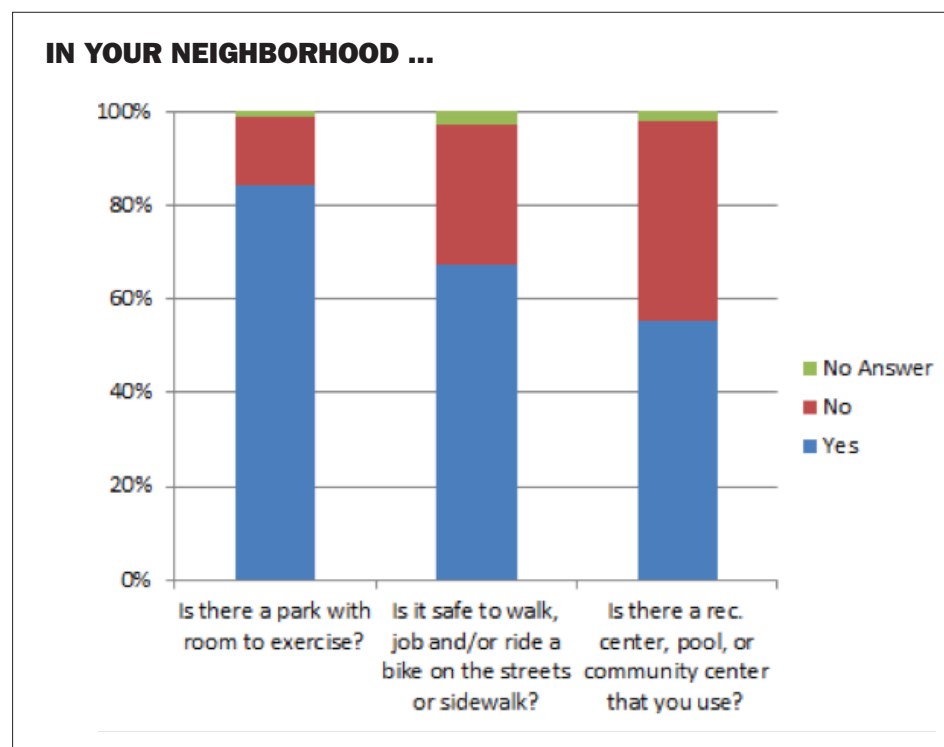
Access to Physical Activity

In addition to healthy diet, physicians recommend that children get an average of 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Remaining active throughout life prevents harmful illnesses, such as obesity, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Free and affordable neighborhood exercise options are essential to ensuring that busy families are able to include exercise in their daily routines.

The community survey asked individuals about access to physical activity in their neighborhood. Most agreed that there were options for physical activity, but it became clear during one-on-one conversations that affordability and the sense of safety are significant barriers.

44% of respondents said that they were concerned that their kids were not getting enough exercise

10% of respondents said that either the lack of safety or sidewalks prevented them from using the park, or otherwise exercising in their neighborhood.



“I live within walking distance of two schools in Auburn. We live in one of the neighborhoods that have sidewalks. That’s one of the main reasons we decided to move here when we were raising our kids. Still, I don’t feel comfortable letting my kids walk by themselves. Especially during the winter months when it’s dark in the mornings and early evenings since there is no lighted pathway. The same is true of the park near our house—it is fine during the day in groups, but definitely not safe at night.”

—Anonymous Auburn resident

Other Barriers: Language and Transportation

Several other themes emerged through the open ended question section of the survey. Respondents were asked to write in any additional barriers to accessing healthy food and physical activity and the two issues that came up the most were the need for adequate public transportation services and language access.

Adequate and affordable public transportation is essential for a thriving economy. Many residents wrote about the need for a better transportation system in Auburn, especially for those residents living further from the city center. Not only do they rely on public transportation to access healthy food and physical activities across the city, but Auburn residents depend on public transportation to get to their jobs in and around King County. Without

a public transportation system that serves all residents equitably, communities struggle and the local economy shrinks.

Many respondents also wrote and spoke about the lack of access to resources in their own language. Many didn't know about, or had never visited, the Auburn farmers' market. Others wished that they had known more about the affordable programs already available through the Auburn Parks and Recreation, or the YMCA. For those residents who speak English as a second language, not having access to information in their own language about what programs already exist in the community is a huge barrier. In order to reach all Auburn residents organizations that offer programs that promote health and wellness should do appropriate outreach and follow-up in immigrant communities.

“I know physical activity is vital for my health and my family’s health. Aside from the high cost of joining a gym, I also don’t know of many programs that are going on around Auburn. I would love for my 10-year-old son to participate in some afterschool activities, but my English is very limited. If activity programs were released in Russian, I would be able to find something. So my biggest obstacles to accessing physical activity are definitely cost and my lack of awareness of available programs because of the language barrier.”

—Tatiana Vinogradova, South Auburn

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings outlined in this report, it is clear that affordability and availability pose the biggest challenges for Auburn residents in accessing healthy food and physical activity. Issues such as public safety, language access for Auburns' immigrant groups, as well as insufficient public transportation, are other barriers that emerged through follow-up conversations.

Due to underemployment and low-wage work, affordability still remains an overwhelming barrier to accessing healthy food and physical activity. Without measures that put more money in people's pockets, initiatives to increase accessibility will have limited results.

Therefore, we conclude that solutions moving forward should aim to directly address the economic barriers that make it increasingly difficult for residents to purchase healthy food as well as make it difficult to participate in activities that keep them healthy and physically fit. Some potential solutions may include:

- 1 Increase healthy food options, including the number of affordable markets and/or produce stands that reach all neighborhoods, especially those furthest from the city center.**
- 2 Financial incentives and subsidies that target the low-income community in Auburn making it easier to afford fresh produce and other healthy food.**
- 3 Increase outreach to immigrant communities to encourage participation in affordable and safe physical activities.**
- 4 Improve job quality by demanding an increase in wages and benefits.**

Furthermore, we recommend that moving forward, there should be a process for formal community input that will determine the next steps necessary to create sustainable change. Creating a system for community engagement in the implementation of this change will ensure accountability and steady progress in improving the health and well-being of Auburn residents.

REFERENCES

- 1** King County City Health Profile: Auburn, Dec. 2012
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- 3** United States. Census Bureau. Population Division. "People Quickfacts." United States Census 2008-2012. Washington: US Census Bureau, Web. 14 Feb. 2014.
- 4** Boone-Heinonen J, Gordon-Larsen P, Kiefe CI, Shikany JM, Lewis CE, Popkin BM. Fast Food Restaurants and Food Stores: Longitudinal Associations With Diet in Young to Middle-aged Adults: The CARDIA Study. Arch Intern Med. 2011;171(13):1162-1170. doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2011.283.

